Grandpa of avante garde

Filmmaker Peterson reflects on 87 years

By LAURIE BOST

HUDSON — He's been called the grandpa of avante garde films, yet Sidney Peterson describes himself as an old man whose film career has been based on a series of coincidence, accidents and luck.

The Columbia County Council on the Arts will pay tribute to Peterson during its second annual county filmmakers festival Saturday, 5 p.m. with the screening of "The Cage," "The Lead Shoe," "Clinic of Stumble" and "The Invisible Moustache of Raoul Dufy."

Born and raised in the San Francisco area, the 87-year-old gentleman has since traveled around the world twice, making New York City his home for the last 20 or so years and more recently, making Columbia County his weekend retreat with his daughter, son-in-law and granchild.

His favorite Columbia County spot is Hudson, what he calls "a very nice little town" that he hopes will stay the same.

At age five he obtained a film of Charlie Chaplin, set up a projector in the basement and charged the neighborhood children admission to watch. At age 10, at the World's Fair, he saw Chaplin alone with a camera man shooting footage. He decided if Chaplin could shoot a film without all the expensive trappings and large budgets, anyone could. That image was to stay with him and become part of him for the rest of his life.

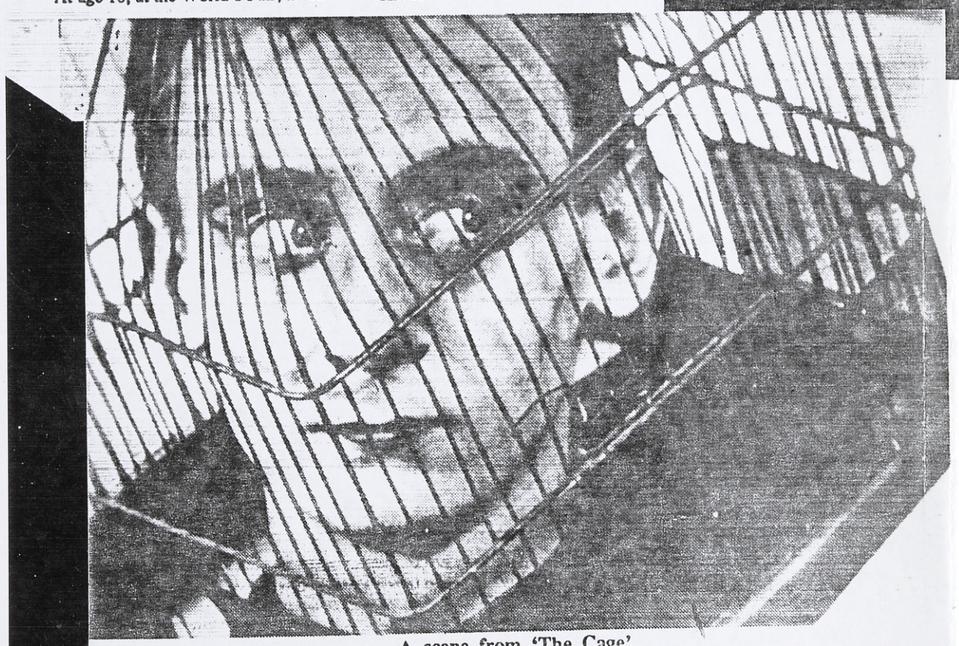
Although well known for his films, his real passions in life are writing and sculpting, the latter for which he dropped out of high school and into art school to study.

His film career began quite by accident. While a teacher at the California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco, it was decided a short film was needed to help educate young students on the history and purpose of the fine arts. He was chosen for the project. He directed, edited and produced the non-commercial education film. The rest is history.

He worked in Hollywood for four years, leaving in 1960 to pursue the writing career he yearned to have. He wrote the novel "A Fly in the Pigment," a send-up about the art world. During this time he intermittently worked on films, eventually working four years for Walt Disney as a writer for cartoons.

His second novel, "The Dark of the Screen," is autobiographical of his relationship with films. It was intended to show that all movies are sections of intermittent action, like life. The screen goes blank many times a minute, yet the average person does not see it because their eyes are too lazy.

Sidney Peterson



A scene from 'The Cage'

Peterson believes the future of the film industry is electronics and low budget films. As he sees it, with the invention of a half-pound camcorder that fits into the palm of the hand and can record sound for little cost, why put expense into films, when low budget, made-for-TV movies and videos are the wave of the future? Going to the movies is becoming an expensive treat for the public, when they can stay home watch a video and enjoy a relatively cheap date.

His favorite of all his films is "The Lead Shoe." "It was not simple, it was the most difficult, the most successful, a collage of film, full of symbols," he said.

Regarding the personal messages of his work, he said "a lot of people sit in the dark to watch motion on the screen, a situation that invites daydreams. Most people in the audience have things going around in their own head. Regardless of the film's intention, the individual has a highly personalized experience. My films express how I see the world."

He offered some advice to future filmmakers: "Never pay anything for the film you are making." All of the films he directed were subsidized, underwritten or done with a grant.

"I have lived in every decade of this century, which gives me a certain perspective. Having made my films in the middle decades, it amazes me how different the interpretations are in this decade," he said. "I feel like I'm on this side of history. If you're lucky, you become a footnote in history when you're gone."

The schedule for the Columbia County Filmmakers Festival follows.

11 a.m.: Screenwriter Donald Westlake's "The Grifters."

1:30 p.m.: "La La Making it in L.A." directed by Frank Mouris, a documentary of 55 aspiring actors who confide directly into the camera their dreams and experiences trying to make it in the Dream Machine.

3 p.m.: Actress Madhur Jaffrey appears in "Autobiography of a Princess," directed by James Ivory, in which Kenningston-based princess delves into her past by watching home movies with her late father's secretary.

5 p.m.: Tribute to Sidney Peterson.

7:30 p.m.: Producer/Director Hart Perry's "Haiti: Killing the Dream," a documentary.

8:45 p.m.: Cinematographer Mark Petersson's "American Dream," directed by Barbara Koppel, a dramatic, complex story of the Hormel Factory strike. It gives a multifaceted view of the extended painful struggle not only between management and workers, but also between union officials and the rank and file.

The festival is made possible in part, with public funds from the New York Council on the Arts and Film/Video Arts Inc. Tickets are $10 for a day pass or $3 per program. For information call the Columbia Council on the Arts, (518) 672-4738.